

Metropolitan Cooperative Library System: Public Perception of Public Libraries

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SEPTEMBER, 1999

PROJECT BACKGROUND.....	2
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	2
RESEARCH METHOD	2
RESULTS SUMMARY.....	4
OVERALL IMPRESSIONS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES	4
USE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES.....	5
<i>Access.....</i>	5
<i>Use of Library Services.....</i>	6
IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARY SERVICES	6
ATTITUDES TOWARDS PUBLIC LIBRARIES	6
COMPARISONS WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS AND SERVICES.....	6
<i>Comparison with Bookstores.....</i>	7
FUTURE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES	7
<i>Allocating Spending Dollars</i>	8
ACCESS TO THE INTERNET.....	8
PROFILE OF LIBRARY USERS VERSUS NON-USERS.....	8
PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN SUGGESTIONS	9
SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS.....	9

Project Background

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The CLA/CSL Library Awareness Task Force, and the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System has requested that market research be conducted:

1. To assess public perceptions in California regarding “libraries and library staff since the evolution of the Internet”¹
2. To complement the existing body of research, and
3. To be useful as input for the development of a statewide library awareness campaign.

Libraries and library associations across the country have been proactively involved in redefining the roles of libraries and library professionals, particularly with a view to working within the new information age that is evolving due to technology and the impact of the Internet. Committees, task forces, and conferences have been organized, using in part the results of previous research to guide discussions of how libraries must evolve with technology in order to survive.

RESEARCH METHOD

To meet the objectives of the RFP, both qualitative and quantitative research was conducted. The qualitative component used focus group methodology. The groups were used to investigate reasons for using or not using libraries and library services, the future of libraries, the impact of the Internet, and discuss ideas for a public relations campaign.

A total of 5 focus groups with library users and non-users combined

¹ RFP: Market Research, Metropolitan Cooperative Library System, May 10, 1999.

were conducted: two English-language groups on Tuesday, August 10, 1999, in Sacramento at MetaResearch, two English-language groups on Thursday, August 12, 1999, held in Redwood City at Tragon Corp., and one Spanish-language group conducted August 18, 1999, in Los Angeles at LA Focus.

The quantitative research was designed to obtain up-to-date attitudes from the general public, and also to compare answers to a few specific questions that had been asked in the past to see if attitudes had changed over time². Although the populations were different, it was nevertheless felt that previous research results could provide at least a minimum basis for comparison.

MetaResearch conducted stratified RDD (random digit dialed) telephone surveys with a random sample of California residents, proportionally representative of the population at a state-wide level³. A questionnaire was designed to quantitatively assess overall impressions of public libraries and their staff, evaluation of specific services, the perceived impact of the Internet, comparisons with bookstores, and thoughts about the future. The questionnaire was translated into Spanish and approximately 6% of the interviews were conducted in Spanish with bilingual interviewers. One thousand and seventeen interviews (1,017) were completed; and the affiliated sampling error was +/- 3.1% (at the 95% confidence

² In particular, the two studies we wanted comparisons with included one conducted nationally in 1996 with a stratified sample of 1,015 U.S. residents ("Public Opinion Survey on the Future of Libraries in the Digital Age", prepared by Lake Research and the Tarrance Group, April 1996. In Buildings, books, and bytes. Libraries and communities in the digital age, Benton Foundation, November 1996. <http://www.benton.org/Library/Kellogg/appendix.html>), and the second with a sample of 1,200 registered voters in California which was conducted 1994 ("California Library Services Study", Binder Poll, May, 1994.)

³ Quotas were established for five geographic areas, based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Approximately 28% of interviews were completed with LA County residents; 20% with Coastal Southern California residents; 18% with San Francisco Bay Area residents; 15% with Central Valley residents; and 18% with residents in the Balance of California.

level, at its most conservative).

Interviewing took place July 23 – August 5, 1999. The average interview length was approximately 13.3 minutes.

Caveat

The sole purpose of this report is to provide a collection, categorization and summarization of public opinion data. Meta intends to neither endorse nor criticize the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System, the California Library Association, or the California State Library their policies, products, or staff. The Client (MCLS) shall be solely responsible for any modifications, revisions, or further disclosure/distribution of this report.

Results Summary

The results summarized in this report combine major findings from the quantitative and qualitative (focus group) components. Conclusions are based on results of both univariate and multivariate statistical analyses.

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

- 1 ➤ *The vast majority (88%) of respondents had positive impressions of public libraries in their area. The most frequently mentioned reason for this positive impression had to do with library staff.*
- 2 ➤ *The majority of respondents (77%) rated the overall service provided by librarians and library staff as either “very helpful” or “absolutely essential.”*
- 3 ➤ *The most “important” contributors to overall impressions of public libraries were the service provided by library staff, the education of children, and the quality of life.*

USE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Access

- 4 ➤ *Approximately three-in-four residents accessed a public library during the past year. The median number of visits among users was 6 times during the year.*
- 5 ➤ *Personal use of public libraries appears to have increased from 1996 (on a national level) to the present (on a state-wide California level)⁴.*
- 6 ➤ *Accessing the library via the Internet does not occur frequently.*
- 7 ➤ *The two main explanations given by non-users for not using a public library were that they had no reason to and that they were too busy.*
- 8 ➤ *Users felt that they had no reason to access the library more frequently and that they were too busy. In addition, approximately one-in-ten mentioned that the hours were inconvenient.*
- 9 ➤ *The “threat” of the Internet in terms of people not using public libraries, or using them less frequently because of the Internet is not great at this particular point in time.*
- 10 ➤ *The explanations given by non-users during the focus groups generally supported the quantitative survey results, but also offered more detail and in some cases, other explanations.*

⁴ The caveat to this conclusion is that the reader should be aware that the two populations surveyed were different, although the wording of the question was similar. The 1996 study (“Public Opinion Survey on the Future of Libraries in the Digital Age”, prepared by Lake Research and the Tarrance Group, April 1996) was conducted on a national sample of 1,015 US residents and the current study was of California residents only.

Use of Library Services

- 11 ➤ *Checking out books for pleasure reading and conducting research for personal information were the top two library services used during the past year (and also in 1994).*

IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARY SERVICES

- 12 ➤ *Focus group participants ranked research for personal information and using resources for homework as the most important library services; obtaining videos and CD's, and reading newspapers and magazines were ranked as the least important services.*
- 13 ➤ *The survey results generally supported the focus group findings in terms of the importance of certain library services. In addition, over a third of respondents felt it was “absolutely critical” that public libraries provide literacy programs. The majority of library services were rated as significantly more important now than five years ago.*

ATTITUDES TOWARDS PUBLIC LIBRARIES

- 14 ➤ *The vast majority of California respondents felt that public libraries play an essential role in the education of children and are essential to the quality of life of their community. The majority also felt that the Internet would not make libraries obsolete.*

COMPARISONS WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS AND SERVICES

- 15 ➤ *The vast majority of respondents rated their fire departments positively (combined ratings of “good” and “excellent”), followed*

by public libraries and police departments.

- 16 ➤ Positive ratings of public libraries and police departments increased significantly from 1994 to 1999.

Comparison with Bookstores

- 17 ➤ Significantly more respondents went to a bookstore during the year than visited a public library.
- 18 ➤ More people are going to bookstores today than three years ago. Bookstores may pose more of a “threat” to public libraries than the Internet.

FUTURE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES

- 19 ➤ Focus group participants felt that libraries will still be important in the future, but they will be more technologically advanced, and offer more convenience/better atmosphere for users.
- 20 ➤ Approximately one-third of respondents felt that public libraries would become more important in the future.
- 21 ➤ Less than a quarter of respondents in both 1996 and the present felt that libraries would become “less important” in the future. However, there were significant differences between the years in terms of the “no change” and “more important” categories.
- 22 ➤ The perceived role of the library in the future has changed from 1996 to the present: fewer people today than in the past think the most important role of the library will be a place where people can use computers and online services. Current residents see the most important role for libraries as a place to read and borrow books.

Allocating Spending Dollars

- 23 ➤ *The majority of residents (over 70%) felt that it was “very important” for the public library in their community to spend money on:*
1. *providing reading hours and other programs for children,*
 2. *purchasing new books and other materials, and*
 3. *maintaining, repairing, and building public library buildings*
- 24 ➤ *Although the above-mentioned points also emerged as the top three important areas for spending in the 1996 survey, there was significantly more support for spending on books and building maintenance this year than in 1996.*

ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

- 25 ➤ *The vast majority of respondents said they personally had access to the Internet – either in a public library, at home, at work, at school or at an Internet café.*

PROFILE OF LIBRARY USERS VERSUS NON-USERS

- 26 ➤ *Library users were significantly more likely than non-users: to have a university degree, to be working, to have children under 18 living in the household, to be between the ages of 30 to 50 years and to have access to the Internet. There were significantly more non-users in the Central Valley than users.*
- 27 ➤ *The three most important characteristics which differentiated users from non-users were: having access to the Internet, age, and education.*

PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN SUGGESTIONS

- 28 ➤ *Focus group participants offered suggestions for public relations campaigns. These ideas included targeting teens and promoting access to technology. Many “slogans” were suggested.*

Summary Conclusions

California respondents have positive perceptions of public libraries, and see them as essential to their communities as well as contributing to the education of their children. They support having libraries spend money to provide reading hours and other programs for children, to purchase new books and materials, and to maintain and repair library buildings.

Respondents also have positive opinions of librarians and library staff in general. They support spending money to provide a place where librarians can help people find information through computers and online services. They also want libraries to have adequate staff to supervise children and offer a safe place to go.

Approximately three-in-four residents accessed a public library during the past year. The median number of visits among users was 6 times during the year.

Respondents felt there was no need to go to the library more frequently. They also cited being too busy, and the hours of the library not being convenient as reasons for not going more often.

Checking out books for pleasure reading and conducting research for personal information were the top two library services used during the past year (and also in 1994).

Offering literacy classes is a necessary service and will continue to be a role of the public library.

The Internet was not seen as the main threat to the survival of public libraries. In fact, library users were more likely to have access to the Internet than non-users, and also to use public libraries for accessing the Internet. Only 6% of users said they used the Internet instead of visiting a library. Focus group participants suggested technology must be a service of the public library system. Up-to-date services and books were key to participants considering visiting public libraries.

Bookstores are viewed as the main competitors of public libraries, and more respondents went to a bookstore this year than visited a public library. Focus group participants want public libraries to have an atmosphere like a bookstore with coffee, food and comfortable furniture. It should be a fun place to go.

These conclusions are based on a study that included 5 focus group discussions and 1,017 telephone interviews with a representative sample of California residents.